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ABSTRACT

This paper explored task difficulty from the perspective of the learner. It investigated the relationship between student perception of task difficulty and actual difficulty as measured by successful completion of a task. The study also collected information on those factors identified by students themselves as implicated in task difficulty. Subjects were 35, first-year, undergraduate, Cantonese-speaking students undertaking a Higher Diploma in Banking and Finance at City University of Hong Kong who estimated the difficulty of a series of tasks, completed the tasks in two classroom sessions, and then provided their views on the reasons for the difficulty of the tasks. Results indicate that student perceptions of task difficulty and actual difficulty as measured by successful performance on the task is low. Student difficulty was expressed by lack of familiarity with task types, confusion over task purpose, and impact and extent of cultural knowledge upon task completion. Findings provide support for those who call for the incorporation of learner strategy training in language pedagogy, especially in courses that attempt to introduce students to new ways of going about the learning process. Appendixes present tasks and student responses to tasks. (Contains nine references.)
(Author/NAV)

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Task Difficulty from the Learners Perspective: Perceptions and Reality

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Abstract

This paper explores the issue of task difficulty from the perspective of the learner. The aims of the investigation were twofold. In the first place, we wanted to investigate the relationship between student perception of task difficulty, and actual difficulty as measured by successful completion of a task. Secondly, we wanted to collect information on those factors identified by students themselves, as implicated in task difficulty. Subjects were 35 first year undergraduate students undertaking a Higher Diploma in Banking and Finance at City University of Hong Kong who estimated the difficulty of a series of tasks, completed the tasks in two classroom sessions, and then provided their views on the reasons for the difficulty of the tasks. Results of the investigation are presented, and their implications are discussed.

Background

Central tasks for the syllabus designer and materials writer include selecting and sequencing language content and learning tasks. Sequencing decisions must be made between units of work ('Do I teach simple present in Unit 1 and present continuous in Unit 2?'), and within units ('Do I introduce the role play before the selective listening?').

> Our interest in sequence arises because the student cannot learn everything at once. If he [sic] is to learn A and B, he must either learn A and then B, or B first and then A. Unless he can learn a little bit of A and then B (but how much and in what order?) ... But these might not be equally viable alternatives. For any given student, one of these sequences may be better - more 'learnable' than others. ... So, in inquiring about sequence, we are really asking whether one way of ordering the content of a course will be more helpful, educationally, than any other possible order. (Rowntree 1981: 106)

The development of task-based approaches to language teaching has made the tasks of between -- and within -- unit sequencing much more complex than it was when syllabuses were driven by graded sets of grammatical items, and when decisions about whether to teach A before B or B before A were made according to linguistic notions of simplicity and complexity. With the adoption of communicative orientations in which tasks are basic curricular building blocks, decisions about what to teach and when, become much more complex, and grading and sequencing tasks involve attempting to predict degrees of difficulty associated with language processing and production, grammar and lexis, and the background knowledge of the learner. In addition, levels of skill and task complexity consist of complex clusters of

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factors which are interactive rather than discrete. These sets of interrelated factors include the following (for a discussion of the role of these factors in determining task difficulty, see Clark (1985).

1. the degree to which the language event is embedded in a context which facilitates comprehension;
2. the degree to which the language event makes cognitive demands on the learner. (Presumably, identifying a named item by pointing to it is cognitively less demanding than describing it.);
3. the degree to which the background knowledge of the language user can be utilized to assist in comprehension;
4. the amount of assistance provided to the language learner. (It is reasonable to assume that conveying a message to a native speaker who is sympathetic towards, and used to dealing with, second language learners is easier than attempting to convey the same message to an unsympathetic interlocutor.);
5. the processing difficulty of the language (This is the only factor on which we have a reasonable amount of empirical evidence.) and;
6. the degree of stress experienced by the learner in taking part in a language event (Presumably, conveying a message to a friend is less stressful than making a speech in front of 500 people.)

(Nunan 1988: 67)

Brindley (1987) suggests that task difficulty will be determined by three clusters of factors: those internal to the learner, those internal to the task, and those internal to the text. Factors associated with the learner will include confidence, motivation, prior learning experience, learning pace, aptitude and stage of proficiency, cultural knowledge/awareness, and linguistic knowledge. Task factors will include relevance, complexity, amount of context provided prior to the task, processibility of the language of the task, the amount of help available to the learner, the degree of grammatical accuracy and contextual appropriacy required, the time available. Text factors will include the size and density of the text, the presentation and format of the text, the number and type of contextual clues provided, and the content of the text. Others to have addressed the issue of task difficulty include Brown and Yule (1983); Nunan (1985, 1989); and Anderson and Lynch (1988). We have synthesized the factors identified in this research, and present these as continua in Table 1.

Table 1: Factors implicated in task difficulty

EASIER	MORE DIFFICULT
LEARNER	
is confident about the task	is not confident
is motivated to carry out the task	is not motivated
has necessary prior learning experiences	has no prior experience
can learn at pace required	cannot learn at pace required
has necessary language skills	does not have language skills
has relevant cultural knowledge	has no relevant cultural knowledge
interested / involved	is uninterested / uninvolved
acts as a participant	acts as an observer
TASK	
is of low cognitive complexity	is cognitively complex
has few steps	has many steps
has plenty of context provided	has no context
has plenty of help available	has no help available
does not require grammatical accuracy	does require grammatical accuracy
has as much time as necessary	has little time

TEXT

has few detailed facts	has many detailed facts
has clear presentation	has unclear presentation
has plenty of contextual clues	has few contextual clues
has familiar, everyday content	has unfamiliar content
presents information in sequence	presents information out of sequence
has familiar topic	has an unfamiliar topic
has graphic/non-verbal support	has no support
is narrative / instructional	is argumentative / explanatory / opinionated
has one speaker	has many speakers
has simple syntax	has complex syntax
has specific vocabulary	has general vocabulary
has temporal sequence	has non-temporal sequence

RESPONSE TYPE

Comprehension		
none	non-verbal	verbal
Production		
repeat/copy	drill	meaningful response
Interaction		
rehearse	role play	problem solve / create

From this brief review of the literature, it can be seen that the issue of complexity is itself complex, involving the interaction of a range of factors including those associated with the learner, the input data or texts, and the procedural operations that the learner is expected to apply in completing the task. However, it seems to us, that out of all these factors, it is the learner who is the key. It therefore seemed reasonable to investigate the perceptions of the learners themselves on the issue of task difficulty. We were particularly interested in seeing whether learner predictions of task difficulty would correlate with the success they experienced in actually completing tasks, and also whether the factors that learners attribute to task difficulty reflect those identified by linguists as set out in Table 1.

Most of the work on task difficulty has been carried out without reference to learners themselves. However, with growing interest in the role of the learner in the learning process, and recent developments in learner-oriented approaches to instruction, it is reasonable to seek an interpretation of task difficulty from the perspective of the learner. The questions to be considered are, firstly, what aspects of a task do learners see as implicated in the difficulty of the task, and, secondly, what is the relationship between perceptions of difficulty and actual difficulty as measured by the ability to complete a task successfully?

The Study

In this section, we describe the research questions, the subjects, materials, data collection procedures and results. In the section which follows we provide an interpretation of the results. We shall also spell out the implications of these findings for future research as well as for pedagogical practice.

Research Questions

The two principal questions underlying this research are as follows:

1. What is the relationship between student perception of task difficulty, and actual difficulty as measured by the successful completion of a task?

2. What factors do students identify as underlying the difficulty of a task?

Subjects

Subjects were 35 first year undergraduate students undertaking a Higher Diploma in Banking and Finance at City University of Hong Kong. The students had all graduated from Middle School and spoke Cantonese as a first language. While these students are expected to be proficient in English, most would be expected to take additional / remedial classes in institutions catering to native speakers.

Materials

The materials used in the experiment are from an EFL text designed for post-beginning learners (Nunan, 1995). The unit of work contains six tasks, which form a task chain. In other words, the tasks are intended to be interrelated, with succeeding tasks growing out of the previous ones, and meant to be roughly graded in difficulty. The linguistic aims of the unit are to practice asking and answering questions about location involving wh- questions with 'be'. The sequence of tasks is set out in the following table. The task chain itself is reproduced in Appendix 1. A transcript of the audio tape used in the task chain is reproduced in Appendix 2.

Table 2: Task chain organization

TASK	TYPE	DATA	PROCEDURE
1	Scanning	Tourist Brochure	1. In pairs, students scan a description of Singapore and underline words that describe the good things about the city. 2. In groups, students discuss whether Singapore is a nice place to visit and say why / why not.
2	Selective listening	List of key words / phrases. Tape of a person asking about the facilities of a particular hotel	Individually, students listen again and check off those facilities which the hotel in question has, and circle those facilities the person does not ask about.
3	Selective listening	List of hotel facilities	Individually, students listen again and check off those facilities which the hotel has, and circle those facilities the person does not ask about.
4	Matching	Part of a letter of complaint	In pairs, students study diagrams and identify the hotel being described.
5	Reformulating	Part of a letter of complaint.	Individually, students write a letter of complaint to a hotel manager about the lack of facilities and services.
6	Personalizing	Hotel brochures. Thumbnail sketches of several leisure activities.	1. Individually, students decide which hotel is best for each person, based on brochures. 2. In groups, students report on their choices, giving reasons.

Procedure

The students were given three general assignments:

1. predict the difficulty of each task, rating 1 as the least difficult and 6 as the most difficult;
2. complete the tasks according to the instructions and;
3. explain why each task might be predicted as easy or difficult.

Results

1. Predict the difficulty of each task, rating 1 as the least difficult and 6 as the most difficult.

Table 3 shows the occurrences of the easiest (1) and most difficult (6) scores for each task. From the data, it can be seen that most students identified tasks 1 and 2 as least likely to cause greatest difficulty. The largest single group identified task 5 as most difficult.

Table 3 : Perception of Difficulty: occurrence of scores for least and most difficult task

Task	1	2	3	4	5	6	Total
Least Difficult	13	12	3	3	1	2	34
Most Difficult	4	0	2	6	15	8	35

2. Complete the tasks according to the instructions

Students were then asked to complete the six tasks according to the instructions. The tasks were completed over two sessions with the audio taped portions (tasks 2,3,4) being given in the second session.

When complete, the tasks were marked on a correct/incorrect basis with no marks being given for partial answers. Table 4 shows the raw data. From these data, it can be seen that in terms of performance, tasks 2 and 3 were the easiest, and task 4 was the most difficult.

Table 4 : Task Scores

Task	1	2	3	4	5	6
Correct	20	33	31	13	21	20
Incorrect	15	2	4	22	14	15

The next question concerns the accuracy of the students' predictions of question difficulty. From their performance on the tasks, it would appear that students found tasks 2 and 3 to be easy, tasks 1, 5 and 6 to be more difficult, and task 4 to be the most difficult. In order to compare perception and reality, we converted the predictions to fractional equivalents through the formula: (35/210) raw score = equivalent. These data are set out in Table 5.

Table 5 : Equivalent scores

Task	35/210	raw score/ prediction	equivalent
1.	0.16666666	90	14
2.	0.16666666	81	15
3.	0.16666666	110	18
4.	0.16666666	143	24
5.	0.16666666	172	29
6.	0.16666666	155	26

Superimposing these statistics in Table 6, we see the relationship between the correct answers and the perceived ease.

Table 6 : Perceptions vs. Reality

Task	1	2	3	4	5	6
Correct	20	33	31	13	21	20
Incorrect	14	15	18	24	29	26

Having made their predictions, and then carried out the tasks, students were asked to identify the sources of difficulty associated with each task. This was done through small group discussions which were recorded, transcribed and analyzed. The results of this analysis are presented in Tables 7 and 8.

Table 7 : Major sources of difficulty associated with each task

TASK	FACTOR	COMMENT
1	Cultural / schematic knowledge.	Students found it difficult to do this task because they do not see Singapore as a nice place to visit. Many Hong Kong people consider Singapore a dull and uninteresting place and a city definitely not to be considered as a prime tourist destination.
2/3	Temporal sequence	The items to be checked did not follow the order in which they were presented on the tape.
4	Discriminability	The four diagrams of the hotel differ only in minor details. This made students feel there
5	Amount of support	Students felt that they needed more grammatical support.
6	Open-endedness	This task required that students give their own opinion. While there was a 'best option' in each case, there was no single right answer.

In the following table, we summarize those factors emerging from the study under the categories identified in the literature review and set out in Table 1. This enables a direct comparison between factors identified by the subjects in this study and those identified by linguists. The data in Table 8 are synthesized from the transcribed small group discussions.

Table 8 : Learner, task and text factors

LEARNER

1. negative attitude to content
2. 'inappropriate' cultural knowledge
3. 'examination' rather than 'learning' orientation
4. lack of attention
5. lack of adequate grammatical knowledge

TEXT

1. lack of appropriate vocabulary
2. density of written text
3. continuous text as opposed to point form data
4. taped rather than live aural data
5. processing speed of aural input
6. information presented out of sequence
7. indiscriminability of visual support

TASK / PROCEDURE

1. unfamiliar task types
2. open-ended rather than closed tasks
3. requirement to do more than one task at a time

Discussion and Implications

The first question addressed by the study was: what is the relationship between student perception of task difficulty, and actual difficulty as measured by successful completion of a task? From the data, it is evident that student perceptions of task difficulty, and actual difficulty as measured by successful performance on the task is low. In general, students were not highly skilled at making predictions about which tasks were likely to case difficulty, and which were likely to be relatively unproblematic. The implications of students' inability to properly perceive task difficulty hinge on the question of what each student brings to a task in terms of effort, and whether this effort is tempered by perception. More simply put, if the question is harder, does the student try harder? The study did not include an experiment which might have elicited answers to this question, but one might reasonably expect one of several outcomes to the misperception of task difficulty. These are set out in summary form in Table 9.

Table 9 : Consequences of misperception of task difficulty

MISPERCEPTION OF TASK DIFFICULTY	CONSEQUENCES
Student believes a task is *harder* than it actually is:	1. Student is intimidated by the task and does not give it appropriate effort. 2. Student is intimidated and does not even attempt the task. 3. Student wastes time searching for supposedly hidden complexity.
Student believes the task is *easier* than it actually is:	1. Student is lulled into a sense of false security by the task and does not give it appropriate effort. 2. Student assumes that one aspect (possibly a superficial one) is the key aspect of the task.

In each of these cases, the student is less likely to engage in real learning. Furthermore, as the student experiences failure, in terms of the marked results the task, it is possible he or she will lose respect for the materials and, by extension, the teacher and the learning process. This is because even the youngest of students bring to the learning classroom a distinct sense of fairness; if the materials are perceived not just as learning tasks with graded levels of difficulty, but as a labyrinth of tricks to be negotiated, this sense of fairness is violated and the learner's trust diminishes.

The second question addressed by the study is: what factors do students identify as underlying the difficulty of a task?

From the data presented in the preceding section, it is clear that students have views on task difficulty and were able to advance reasons for their views, despite the fact that, in the case of this study, these views did not reflect actual difficulty. Many of the factors identified by the learners, as presented in Table 7, mirrored those which we discovered in the review of the literature (see Table 1).

1. Lack of familiarity with task types (e.g. selective listening): This was predicted by students (and in some cases transpired) to be difficult. The implication of this result is that we ought to provide learners systematic training in the types of tasks used in our curriculum, and that the strategies in completing such tasks ought to be made explicit.

2. Confusion on the part of students over the purpose of tasks: It was reported that tasks which looked easy (e.g. checking the box) must be "trick" questions, and must therefore be difficult. This may reflect the highly competitive, examination oriented cultural and educational context in which students have grown up and which might serve them well in some situations. However, as language learning is largely a cooperative and not a competitive task, it may be necessary to reorient such students into a classroom culture of cooperation where success is not always measured in marks alone.

3. Cultural knowledge: The literature *assumes* that cultural and schematic background knowledge facilitates the completion of tasks. However, in this case, this knowledge interfered with rather than assisted in completion of the task. Students had plenty of knowledge about Singapore. However, it was negatively loaded, and this prevented some students from completing the task successfully. Such problems are inevitable in an international textbook employing communicative real world materials. This one particular exercise may be even less successful when offered to an EFL class of Singaporeans living in Singapore. Dealing with this problem requires a sensitivity on the part of the teacher to the social and cultural contexts of both the learners and the text and a willingness to subtly alter and tailor the activities to make them appropriate.

The experimental procedure set out in this paper, is relatively easy to replicate in almost any classroom. It adds a reflective dimension to the language learning task, and focuses learners on important dimensions of the learning process. It also encourages them to articulate their own "theories" of language learning. As a pedagogical procedure, it therefore provides a dimension of learner training, a dimension which has been argued as being beneficial to the learning process. Through engaging in tasks such as this, learners become much more sensitive to what it is to be a learner.

Conclusion

This study provides support for those who call for the incorporation of learner strategy training in language pedagogy. This is particularly true of courses which attempt to introduce students to new ways of going about the learning process. Seeing things from the perspective of the learners has provided us with much richer insights into processes of learning within a task-based curriculum than would have been possible without involving learners themselves in the research process. Rather than carrying out research *on* learners, we believe that work of this sort should be carried out in collaboration *with* learners. In this way, teaching, learning and research can be mutually reinforcing, and the tension which often exists between teaching and research can be overcome.

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Appendices

Appendix 1
Atlas Learning Centered Communication Unit 11, *Where's the Health Club?*, Task Chain 1

Appendix 2
Atlas Learning Centered Communication Unit 11, *Where's the Health Club?*, Task Chain 1, Audio tape transcript
Clerk: Reception. Can I help you?
Azi: Yes. This is room 1607. I'd like some information about the hotel please.
Clerk: Certainly, sir.
Azi: Where's the pool?
Clerk: It's on the roof, next to the rooftop garden.
Azi: And the restaurants? Where are they?
Clerk: There's a coffee shop on the ground floor and a skyview restaurant on the 31st floor.
Azi: OK, fine. And what about the gym or health club.
Clerk: I'm sorry, but we don't have a gym or health club.
Azi: That's too bad. Where's the business center?
Clerk: We don't have a business center.
Azi: No business center?
Clerk: No, sir.
Azi: What about a newsstand? You must have a newsstand.
Clerk: Sorry, sir.
Azi: Well, let me have room service.
Clerk: There's no room service until 7:00, I'm afraid.
Azi: Well, that's too bad. Can you put me through to the manager? I want to complain.
Clerk: Certainly, sir.

Appendix 3
Student responses when asked to explain why each task might be predicted as easy or difficult:

Each class of approximately 20 students was arranged in six groups with each group assigned one of the Tasks. The groups were then asked to discuss why their assigned Task might be predicted as difficult or easy. After ten minutes, each group reported on their Task and suggested their reasons and handed in their responses. Additional reasons were solicited from the other students.

Clarification was sought where necessary and accompanies the following statements *in italics*. Note: the % sign is as recorded on the student sheets.

Task 1.
Confusion % picture + text. *The text does not exactly match the picture so the visual clues are not overly helpful.*
No relationship % pictures and question.
Don't know the meaning of the words.
Hard to discuss Singapore is a nice place. *The students are used to thinking of Singapore as a dull and uninteresting place and a city definitely not to be considered as a prime tourist destination.*
A lot of words. *It's difficult to read because there is so much text, relative to the other questions.*
No point form. Not easy to understand.
No choice for the answer. *It would be easier if there were choices available.*
No definite answer. *It's difficult to tell what the exact answer should be and exactly how many answers there should/might be.*

Task 2.
The speed is too fast.
The pronunciation is not clear.
If you don't familiar with the pronunciation of the words, you are unable to answer the question.
The words is difficult or too similar.
One comment from a student outside the group was that it was thought to be difficult because just ticking boxes looks easy; if it looks too easy, there must be a trick.

Task 3.
The student may be unfamiliar with the words.
Do not pay attention to the tape. *It is difficult if the student does not pay attention to the tape.*
Don't understand the conversation.
Unfamiliar with the format of the work.
Too much task need to do at the one time. *It's difficult to concentrate on ticking yes and no as well as circling those items which are not mentioned.*
Quite confusing about the room services part. *It's difficult to know what is expected as a correct answer as the question asks what services the hotel has; room service is not available at the time of the phone call, but is available after 7 p.m.*
Not in order. *The task would be easier if the answers followed the order of the tape.*

Task 4.
You have to use ears and eyes *and* pay more attention.
You have to make decision during the listening.
The four picture is too similar, make me too confusing.
Difficult to identify the pictures, they are too confuse.
All pictures look similar at the first sight.
Bad expression. *The quality of the audio tape is poor.*
No difference between picture 1 and 3.
From the picture, we can't exactly know what the facilities are.

Task 5.
The answer must be certain.
Must be understand all the message to find the answer.
Must know situation of the writer.
If you listened, the question is easy to do.
Not familiar with this kind of letter - format.
Difficult to use proper language, words, expression and tone.
Not easy to take care the letters' structure.
Can't use correct grammar. *The difficulty of the task is influenced by the fact that the grammar might be too difficult for the students; they need to know not just the word, but its correct form.*

Task 6.
Not enough information.
Photocopy not clear.
Some difficult words.
Not familiar with those hotel very well.
Different person has different demand, different financial condition, different time available.
Not sure there is any suitable hotel meeting their needs. *It's not clear whether or not there is in each case a correct answer; it may be that none of the hotels are suitable for the sample travellers.*
Time - consumed - because the question is too long.
Not detail on the cover page of brochures.
Need to give reasons and have more thinkings. *The task is difficult in that it is open ended without a straightforward answer.*